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***Creating/Action: Physical and Abstract Sites of Arts Practice***

Convenors: Miik Green and Lauren McCartney (Curtin University)

**AAANZ Annual Conference** 5-8 December, Launceston

***The space of make: studio as topology***

**PAPER**

In his 1969 essay entitled *Subject Matter*, Dan Graham briefly analyses one of Bruce Nauman's latex rubber works and observes how their arched form is determined by the properties of "*expansion, contraction and skew*" intrinsic to the material. For Graham, the way that these properties are intrinsically enmeshed constitutes a *topology*, a theory drawn from mathematics in which space is understood not as a static field but in terms of properties of connectedness, movement and differentiation.

In this paper, I will propose that topology provides a methodological model for apprehending the multifarious aspects of practice that also allows for their continual movement and transformation. "Practice", in the context of contemporary art, is conceived as a network of open-ended activities across an array of sites – places that in addition to the production space may include laptop, library, storage shed, shower, bus and kitchen table.

In relation to practice-led research and the continually fraught relationship between practice and exegesis (here exemplified by the grubby lump of plasticine versus the crisp frames of OSX), I will argue that a topological model of practice allows the manifold dimensions of studio-based research to be read as coextensive modes of activity – a model in which thinking and making are not dichotomous points but inflections in an amorphous and dynamic field.

In *Codification* (1966), Nauman provides a taxonomy of his key concerns thus:

*CODIFICATION, 1966*

1. *Personal appearance and skin*
  2. *Gestures*
  3. *Ordinary actions such as those concerned with eating and drinking*
  4. *Traces of activity such as footprints and material objects*
  5. *Simple sounds – spoken and written words*
- Metacommunication messages*

*Feedback*

*Analogic and digital codification* (Nauman 2003)

This list, which can be read as a sardonic substitute for an artist statement, acts as a methodological stocktake of the principle elements and processes that comprised his practice at the time. It is the sort of list that we would expect from 1966 – typed up and categorical, the original page lost, a work that now exists only as a transcription.

But the lexical economy of the list means that some of its structural subtleties are immediately apparent. In particular, we notice that the last two terms sit at a remove from the itemized list of ingredients, somehow comprising a different order of activity. Unlike the carefully ranked entries above, these last two lines can be read as the substrate upon which these activities are scaffolded.

In this context, it is reasonable to assume that the term “Feedback” refers specifically to cyclical interference. This interpretation is supported by Nauman’s interest in looped actions as evidenced by works such as *Stamping in the Studio* (1968) and his corridor video installations of the early 1970s. This cyclical process is further expressed at the methodological level by his reincorporation of works and documentation into the fabric of subsequent works. The effect of feedback here disrupts the straightforward spatio-temporal fabric of practice, so that when viewing Nauman’s work, notions of before and

after are continually disrupted. This feedback – folding of practice back upon itself – is what comprises its topological condition.

Nauman's codification is not simply a map of practice but an extension of it. As a taxonomy of his studio, it exemplifies the programmatic and documentary qualities of his performances, objects and videos. *Codification* is **both** an explanatory text and an enactment – it is simultaneously a representation of Nauman's "systemic interventions" or feedback loops (Morgan 2002, 22) and a manifestation of those same research strategies.

Despite its often mercurial impression, Nauman's practice is shaped by an entirely coherent methodology – one in which all parts are, however elliptically, contiguous. This topology arises not only through material or formal connections, but through the persistent logic of his methodology. A topological model of practice emphasises the meta-logic that directs studio research without limiting the capacity of its parts to behave in entirely "incoherent" ways.

In these terms, practice is figured as a composite reticulated structure or what Michel Serres has described as a "crumpled handkerchief" (1995, 60), in which "apparently widely separated points may be drawn together into adjacency" (Conner 2004, n.p). A topological account enables all parts of a practice to be seen as potential actors capable of forming new strategic arrangements regardless of spatio-temporal distance and regardless of their mode or medium. Viewed as a topology, the creative and scholarly aspects of practice become contiguous zones of enquiry rather than competing "domains".

This paper is derived from my current PhD research in which I am seeking to provide an account of the agitive forces that arise in the studio that are separate from the intentionality the artist – a field of enquiry that arisen out of my exploration of the sculptural self-portrait over the past 15 years. In my practice, the sculptural object acts less as a *representation* of the self, but rather a *manifestation* of an errant mimetic program - one that has strayed from observing the clear boundaries of subject and object

upon which the portrait depends. My work is essentially a portrait of the making process-at-large – a highly selective and choreographed representation of that entity “practice”.

The resulting works now draw upon a palette of form that is shaped by the generative parameters provided by *genre* (self-portraiture), **process** (modelling, casting and moulding) and *site* (studio). Using sculptures and photographs, the resulting works bring together both premeditated forms and incidental objects that arise through the studio setting and production processes.

One of the chief “contours” that exerts itself in my practice is the interplay of *interior-exterior*. This dual vector helps to establish the boundaries and rules that shape my studio production process. Seen from the perspective of geocriticism, *interior-exterior* as a composite term infers a non-hierarchical relationship between these two states/modes. It suggests a spatio-temporal field created by the passage between these two conditions. As a topological contour, *interior-exterior* is not simply a figure of practice, but also describes the dynamics between subject and object and cast and mould that play out in my practice.

Within my practice, ingredients are determined by a system of “permissions” – a “codification” that determines the way that objects exchanged between the exterior world and the interior terrain of practice. Specifically, **items may enter the practice either courtesy of their intrinsic role in the making process, or their proximity to the site of production, on the condition that their equivalent can be found within the pre-existing formal palette.** By its nature then, this system of permissions provides an agentive rubric that gives formal and semantic structure to the practice above and beyond my own subjective choices. This method of orientation is thus *topological*; it provides a controlled formal palette that gives direction to the making process while allowing an open field of possibilities for the ways in which these ingredients can be combined.

The casting process is central to this topology and the majority of the objects I work with are cast using flexible moulds. The moulding/casting process involves a literal exchange

between exterior and interior as the object becomes translated from an external form into the internal surface of the mould and then back again. During this process the object is translated into a network of mould pieces - deterritorialised sections that open out the encapsulated surface of the original form, converting it into an atomized field. The original object is first broken out into a complex of parts and then recovered as this sequence of mould interiors are brought back into a unity in the final cast. The mould-cast is thus an embodiment of the interior-exterior contour – in its surface and void form a coextensive entity.

This contour is also actively deployed when hollow forms are reoriented to reveal their internal cavities. A process that sets forth a dialogue between the refined, organized outer surface and its more perfunctory, uninflected interior. The objects are revealed as incomplete shells – surfaces that never fully resolve themselves into solid volumes. In addition to this, their hollowness means that objects are not bound by their original orientation, and can assume a variety of different configurations. These are topological objects, entities that have no definitive formal or temporal anchor – they assert themselves as physical facts, yet also infer future, unforeseen arrangements and combinations. In effect, despite their static form, these objects are spatially and temporally distributed and indeterminate.

This mobility of parts can be seen by comparing these two iterations of Deadweight. In the original version, objects are arranged into a discrete tableau: while in its second iteration, these components migrate from their original configurations onto the walls or into other more precarious configurations and are supplemented by components adapted from earlier works. These “outmoded” elements become a new material source – their recovery and reincorporation into the immediate moment of practice further enacts the collapse of interior/exterior as binaries (studio/storage) and establishes the inside/outside of practice as a contiguous field, unbounded by the sequential logic of linear temporality.

These elements thus record the porosity of the studio, as internal spaces of production intersect with the “outside” world. Household items awaiting restoration or repair are

brought into the studio where they precipitate sculptural possibilities. Elsewhere the amorphous and fragmented qualities of roadside debris or garden rocks, register against the undulations of rag or lumps of clay that populate my production space.

Under these topological conditions, a tarpaulin can echo a memorial rock or the wig of a Baroque bust. The “likeness” that is central to the ontology of the portrait, dissolves into a network of fluid associations based on formal resemblance, but nonetheless anchored by their relationship to the spatio-temporal event of practice – the fact that it comprises a bounded, yet fluid, entity.

As these works demonstrate, these patterns of correspondence and connection occur elliptically as topological movements. Here, the form of each photograph echoes the other – the colour of the backdrops, the swirling undulation at the top of each head – to establish these individual forms as topologically connected events. These equivalences point to both moments – the impromptu studio shot, and the carefully staged museum photograph – and the spaces they connote – the studio and the archive as dynamic contiguities.

These are the kinds of spatio-temporal slippages from which the notion of “practice” can be said to arise. To speak of “practice” is to indicate a spatio-temporal extension – a continuum of activities and sites that can only be apprehended when viewed as contours of a topological field – not in terms of the binaries of thinking and making.

These events – and their verbal articulation in this presentation – both exist as a notation of topological contours and as new parts within that system. To articulate the reflexive tissue that gives coherence to practice is to give it new semantic and structural possibilities. As Nauman tells us from 1966, to chart the topological field of practice is not to offer a decoding of practice, but to engage in a new layer of codification. This then might be the best way to “think” about the exegesis – as a source of new patterns to *expand, contract* and *skew* in practice.

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